



# Higher Education Review of Blackburn College

January 2015

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Blackburn College. The review took place from 12 to 15 January 2015 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Fazal Dad
- Dr Elisabeth Cook
- Ms Ann Hill
- Mrs Jacqueline Scott (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Blackburn College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 6.

In reviewing Blackburn College the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)<sup>4</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106).

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review web pages: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review).

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Blackburn College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Blackburn College.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Blackburn College.

- The College's responsiveness to employer views in the development of the curriculum (Expectation B1).
- The College's approach towards and commitment to diversity and inclusivity in the curriculum and in the wider student experience (Expectation B2).
- The range of scholarly and professional development activities undertaken by staff and the consequent enrichment of the student learning experience (Expectation B3).
- The development of students' employability in the curriculum and in teaching, learning and assessment, enabling students to gain real workplace experience (Expectation B4).
- The widespread integration of work-based learning through active and extensive collaboration with employer networks (Expectation B10).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Blackburn College.

By May 2015:

- ensure consistent application of the College's policy for the timeliness of feedback on assessed work (Expectation B6)
- ensure timely notification to external examiners of dates of examining boards and systematic responses to their reports (Expectation B7).

By July 2015:

- ensure that the information in student handbooks is consistent and complete (Expectation C)
- establish and implement minimum standards for the content of the virtual learning environment (Expectations B3 and C).

By September 2015:

- further monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives to increase retention rates (Expectations B2 and B3)

- develop a strategic and consistent approach to e-learning initiatives, and to the exploitation of the virtual learning environment as a major learning and teaching tool (Expectation B4)
- ensure that learning resources necessary for programme delivery are consistently identified and provided (Expectations B4 and B1)
- establish a clear relationship between the College's higher education priorities and its enhancement practices (Enhancement).

## **Theme: Student Employability**

The College's higher education provision focuses on vocationally relevant programmes that meet the needs of students and employers in key areas such as finance, marketing, leadership and management, and in high employment sectors such as teaching, public services, health and social care. An emphasis on employability has been embedded through the development of its foundation degrees.

The College has an extensive and well developed infrastructure for employer liaison, for the strategic development of partnerships with employers and for their involvement in curriculum design and development. Employability is central to the design of the curriculum and a key part of the assessment strategy is to assess knowledge, skills and abilities that are relevant to employers. Employers regard the College's work-based learning schemes as successfully reflecting the challenges and reality of the workplace.

There is universal agreement among students, staff and employers of the strength, depth and range of the College's partnerships with employers. The development of students' employability in the curriculum and in teaching, learning and assessment, and the opportunities for students to gain real workplace experience, are particular strengths of Blackburn College.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

## About Blackburn College

Blackburn College (the College) is a large provider of post-compulsory education and training, based on a single campus comprising the University Centre at Blackburn College and five further education centres. It is the main provider of higher education in Pennine Lancashire, with a mission to transform 'lives, businesses and the community through outstanding education, training and support'. It provides education for over 16,000 students, of whom over 3,000 are in higher education. Over half of the College's students are from widening participation postcodes, reflecting the nature of the population of its region.

The majority of the College's higher education students study for awards validated by University of Lancaster. However, the College also offers programmes leading to awards of the University of Central Lancashire, the University of South Wales, the University of Cumbria, and Pearson Education.

Since the last QAA review the College has seen a reconfiguration of the academic governance of its higher education provision and a restructuring of the management of the University Centre. There has also been an expansion of the campus and growth in the facilities available in the University Centre. In 2014 the College set out its Higher Education Academic Plan which aims to support the development of greater subject specialism in higher education programmes, and to place a focus on provision relevant to employment.

The College sees the current challenges facing it as being those arising from key national political, economic and social priorities for higher education. In particular it places an emphasis on supporting the employability of students in the context of its location in an area with a large proportion of young people in the community and with a large reliance on small and medium enterprises for employment. Although financially stable, the College recognises the budgetary challenges facing the higher education sector and the unknown consequences of changes in national policy.

The outcomes of the last QAA review in 2010 were positive and resulted in reviewers identifying 10 features of good practice and two recommendations. The College has addressed the first recommendation through a reconfiguration of its governance of higher education provision. The second recommendation, relating to e-learning, has been addressed through the appointment of a Head of E-learning; the College intends to conduct a review of the effectiveness of its e-learning initiatives during 2014-15.

## Explanation of the findings about Blackburn College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

# **1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations**

**Expectation (A1):** In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

**a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:**

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

## **Findings**

1.1 The College's Academic Regulations outline the procedures underpinning programme design and these give due consideration to relevant external references: the FHEQ, qualification descriptors, credit frameworks, Subject Benchmark Statements and professional body requirements. Planned development in award design, validation and review involves the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee - Higher Education (LTAC-HE) and the Academic Board. Programme design is tested rigorously by internal and external validation panels.

1.2 Internal validation panels scrutinise the preparatory work of programme teams before programmes proceed to external validation. This two-tier process is key in ensuring that qualifications are set at the appropriate level, that programme outcomes are defined and aligned suitably, that the credit framework is coherent, and that due account is taken of Subject Benchmark Statements and relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements. To assist validation panels, the documentation made available to them includes programme specifications.

1.3 In their 2012-13 Annual Programme Review report to University of Lancaster, the College gave 'full assurance that standards are comparable', based on their critical reflection

upon external examiners' reports for that year. The report also noted that, in keeping with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*, programmes were related to the world of work. The team formed the view that the College's processes for oversight of academic standards allow the Expectation to be met.

1.4 The team reviewed documents prepared for validation events and found that this evidence supported the statements made in the self-evaluation document. The University of South Wales cited the mapping of modules and course learning outcomes against the QAA Framework Level Descriptors as good practice in the validation report for the Foundation Degree in Paralegal Studies. The BA (Hons) Education Studies submission to University of Lancaster confirmed that the application of the FHEQ was explicit in the discussions of explanations at each level.

1.5 The College's internal validations showed rigorous consideration of these issues. The validation panel for the FdA and BA (Hons) Hospitality Management stipulated the revisiting of the programme's teaching, learning and assessment strategy to ensure it would enable students to achieve threshold standards across levels 4 to 6. It also noted the need for greater differentiation of programme learning outcomes at level 6 and considered that Subject Benchmark Statements had not been applied in a sufficiently critical and contextualised way. Similarly, the BSc (Hons) Construction panel recorded that prior to the internal validation event, programme learning outcomes had been rewritten, module learning outcomes amended and more detail provided on how the programme design had been informed by the requirements of professional bodies.

1.6 The LTAC-HE oversees validation activity and the review team examined the minutes and reports this committee had received. One report noted, as a validation condition for one programme, the need for clearer mapping of programme learning outcomes.

1.7 The team read reports written by external examiners and by University of Lancaster course consultants and found that these confirmed the positioning of qualifications at the appropriate level, that programme learning outcomes aligned with the qualification awarded, and that consideration had been given to Subject Benchmark Statements and other professional body expectations in the programme design process. The student submission indicated that students found the level of their assessments appropriate and students confirmed verbally their awareness of the rise in challenge across levels. Staff indicated that their understanding of the elements of the FHEQ was enhanced through preparing programmes for validation.

1.8 The team considered that the processes followed by the College, in conjunction with those of its awarding bodies and its awarding organisation, enabled staff at all levels to gain a good understanding of the principles of the FHEQ and to apply these appropriately within programme design. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated risk level is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.9 The College has worked closely with its university partners to develop robust systems to assure and enhance academic standards. It has a full suite of academic regulations and responsibility for these, and for academic standards, rests with the Academic Board. The Academic Registrar leads on the updating of the Academic Regulations, which are revised annually; the last major update was during 2012-13 to take into consideration revisions to the Quality Code.

1.10 Following the recommendation of the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review in 2010 to evaluate the effectiveness of the newly created staff roles and recently implemented committee structures in the management of higher education, the College has again reconfigured its academic governance structures. Lines of accountability run from programme committees and school boards through to LTAC-HE and then to the Academic Board. LTAC-HE is the principal forum for discussion of operational matters that impact on standards and quality. The team formed the view that the College's framework now enables suitable oversight of the award of credit and qualifications.

1.11 Changes to University of Lancaster assessment regulations were implemented in 2013-14 and students now receive letter grades rather than percentage marks. Staff development took place to communicate these changes. The student submission reported some confusion in relation to these changes, but prompt action by tutors and the Academic Registrar to remedy this. A small number of external examiner/course consultant reports noted local difficulties with these changes, as did some staff, and the 2012-13 higher education self-evaluation identified the need for regulatory changes to be understood widely by staff and students and the challenges involved in updating software to deal with these.

1.12 The review team noted the College's very clear guidance on the division of responsibilities for academic governance and management between the College and its university partners, given that the College does not yet have its own degree-awarding powers. Staff cited the memoranda of understanding with university partners and programme handbooks as sources for understanding the relevant regulatory framework and students felt they were advised clearly through information provided at interview and via the website and course materials.

1.13 The team reviewed minutes of LTAC-HE and the Academic Board, and noted the scrutiny of updates to Academic Regulations by the former and the awareness of achieving connectivity throughout the College's governance structure on the part of the latter. External examiners' reports confirmed that assessment regulations were appropriate and consistent and that assessment procedures and assessment boards were conducted fairly, rigorously and in accordance with institutional regulations.

1.14 The team formed the view that the College's regulatory systems are well understood and consistently applied. The revised committee structure is still in the process of bedding down, as indicated by the ongoing development of agendas and by the growing importance of programme committees as their place in the governance structure becomes more defined.

1.15 On the basis of the evidence assessed, and in particular the views expressed by a range of external examiners, the team concludes that the Expectation is met. The associated level of risk is judged to be low since the College works with, and is answerable to, a range of awarding bodies and its awarding organisation.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.16 The College takes responsibility for using the reference points provided by its awarding bodies to maintain standards in delivery and assessment. Although the extent of delegation varies, the College's responsibilities with respect to each of its partners are clearly defined by the four awarding bodies (University of Lancaster, University of South Wales, University of Central Lancashire, University of Cumbria) and awarding organisation (Pearson). There is shared responsibility for programme development and approval between the College and University of Lancaster, and between the College and the University of Cumbria, while for the University of Central Lancashire and the University of South Wales the responsibility remains with the awarding body.

1.17 Students confirmed that they had a good understanding of their programmes prior to entry and that they had an awareness of programme aims and learning outcomes through their programme handbooks. Although programme handbooks do not bear the logo of the degree-awarding bodies, students had a clear understanding of which awarding body validated their programmes, having been told at interview or via the College website.

1.18 The College produces programme specifications which are included in some, but not all, programme handbooks. Students confirmed that they are aware of programme specifications which are available on the College website. Nevertheless the review team found that that not all programme specifications were available on the College website.

1.19 All students are entitled to a transcript of their results, and to a certificate confirming the award. In the case of all awarding bodies other than University of Lancaster the partner provides the results direct to the student. In the case of University of Lancaster, student transcripts and certificates are available from the College's Examinations Department.

1.20 Overall, the College understands its responsibilities for maintaining a definitive record of each programme. Information about the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected achievement is available to students, but this information could helpfully be more helpfully consistent in presentation across the College's higher education programmes. The team concludes that the Expectation A2.2 is met and that the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.21 The College's higher education provision consists of FHEQ level 4 and 5 Higher National, foundation degree and, honours degree programmes and a small postgraduate provision, variously offered in part-time and full-time mode.

1.22 For new programmes, the degree-awarding bodies ensure, through their own programme approval processes, that programmes meet UK threshold academic standards. The College is an approved centre for Pearson programmes. The processes and procedures of the College allow Expectation A3.1 to be met.

1.23 The review team considered documentation including minutes of meetings and reports, and held meetings with the Principal, senior staff, programme leaders, university staff and teaching staff. Members of staff of the College were able to demonstrate a commitment to and an understanding of Subject Benchmark Statements, the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* and alignment with the Quality Code.

1.24 In relation to the validation of new programmes, staff of the College and of awarding bodies demonstrated a clear understanding of their responsibilities and of the validation processes. With the exception of Pearson programmes, validation processes approve a programme specification which is subsequently published on the College website.

1.25 Business planning processes are clearly set out in a useful quality cycle and validation framework. Academic programme consultants from the awarding bodies meet regularly with staff and course teams and are well regarded by them. In the case of University of Lancaster, programme consultants provide an annual report of their engagement with their programme(s), a process which the team found to play an effective part in securing standards.

1.26 External employer participation in programme development is effective and their contribution is highly valued by the College. Where relevant, programme development includes consideration of National Occupational Standards for programmes in health and social care and of the requirements of professional bodies, such as the British Psychology Society (BSc (Hons) Applied Psychology), the Institute of Engineering and Technology (BEng (Hons) Electrical and Electronic Engineering) and the Association of Photographers (FDA Photographic Media).

1.27 The processes for the internal approval of new programmes are in place, are systematic and are clearly understood by staff. The review team finds that the College's higher education provision is developed and approved in accordance with the academic frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies, and concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.28 The College's Academic Regulations set out expectations in relation to assessment practice, including the design and aggregation of individual elements to evidence achievement of learning outcomes at module and programme levels.

1.29 The review team reviewed a range of documentary evidence and met academic staff of the College and awarding bodies. Programme handbooks reflect awarding body academic frameworks and regulations. The College's virtual learning environment (VLE) also provides links to awarding body and awarding organisation academic regulations to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the requirements of credit.

1.30 All programmes have explicit programme-level learning outcomes that are compatible with the FHEQ and consistent with relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. Modules within programmes have stated learning outcomes that are consistent with the academic level of the module and have explicitly stated credits and levels. Validation documents contain explicit details of the assignment of modules to academic levels and justification for the assignments made. Programme and module learning outcomes and module proposals are scrutinised by internal and external validation panels.

1.31 The College and awarding bodies have partnership agreements which are supported by a management structure and processes to enable oversight of the higher education provision, allowing the Expectation to be met.

1.32 Learning outcomes are defined clearly at both programme and module level, and modules within programmes have explicitly stated credits and levels. Programme specifications include details of the programme's assessment strategy as regards design and validity of strategies, and the range, nature and volume of assessment tasks, to ensure that assessment is appropriate for the level and that it enables students to demonstrate the required learning outcomes.

1.33 External examiners are also expected to comment on whether students are achieving intended module and programme learning outcomes, and the team found that reports confirm this is the case. External examiners also confirm the achievement of learning outcomes in work-based learning. University of Lancaster course consultants confirm that assessment procedures align closely with learning outcomes.

1.34 External examiners are asked to confirm that learning, teaching and assessment for the programmes they examine are consistent with the FHEQ. External examiners' reports for the overwhelming majority of programmes delivered at the College confirm that they meet or exceed these expectations. On the rare occasions that any concern has been indicated by

an external examiner, the team found evidence that the College has acted robustly, liaising with the relevant partner as appropriate in response to the matters raised.

1.35 In addition, external examiners are required to comment on the suitability of assessments in relation to the relevant learning outcomes and assessment practices elsewhere in the sector. The College's Higher Education Quality Unit receives and reviews external examiner reports centrally to ensure that the College would be informed should any external examiner have doubts about the validity of assessments.

1.36 Students are aware of the requirements to achieve credit. The College has suitable supportive processes for students with protected characteristics.

1.37 The College has developed appropriate mechanisms with its awarding bodies for the award of credit and qualifications. To ensure that threshold academic standards are met, decisions to award credit or qualifications are based on robust evidence that learning outcomes at both module and programme levels have been achieved. The team noted that some programme handbooks were not explicit in relation to the assessment specification of programme aims. This has led to a recommendation in Part C that the information in student handbooks should be consistent and complete.

1.38 The College has systems to ensure that its processes are aligned with the academic regulations of its awarding bodies in this respect, and the team found that these are working effectively. The team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.39 The responsibility for annual monitoring and periodic reviews is shared between the College and awarding bodies. The Academic Board has strategic oversight of all outcomes and is responsible for approving student outcomes meeting the academic thresholds. The LTAC-HE is responsible for operational matters and acts as the conduit between the Academic Board and quality processes.

1.40 The annual monitoring review process at the College draws together feedback from students, staff, external examiners and employers to provide the LTAC-HE with tangible performance data to address any shortfalls and identify best practice. External examiners' reports are centrally recorded and distributed to appropriate managers to action areas of recommendations.

1.41 The College is responsible for periodic reviews of Pearson programmes on a three-yearly cycle. For other programmes the responsibility for conducting periodic reviews of programmes is shared with the awarding body. Panel membership of this review process has an appropriate level of externality with student, external academic and industrial participants.

1.42 The College's management structure and regulatory processes enable oversight of its higher education provision and meet the requirements of awarding bodies. The College has annual monitoring processes and other annual and periodic review mechanisms as required by the awarding bodies.

1.43 The team reviewed documentary evidence, minutes from the Academic Board and LTAC-HE, and met staff to discuss the process of annual monitoring, review and oversight by the College.

1.44 Annual monitoring starts with Annual Programme Review (APR) and continues through the higher education self-evaluation into annual institutional reports to each partner university. Strategic oversight of monitoring and review rests with the Academic Board whose duty, in monitoring students' grade profiles, is to satisfy itself of the academic integrity of the awards made. LTAC-HE undertakes more detailed monitoring. The team found that the oversight of annual monitoring carried out by these bodies is effective.

1.45 The outcome of each APR is an action plan for the programme team which is monitored through the School Board. The review team concluded that this was an effective process to ensure all action points are robustly addressed. The APRs feed into an overall higher education self-evaluation and action plan which is monitored by the LTAC-HE committee to address College-wide issues. An annual institutional report is produced for each partner university.

1.46 The College has systems to enable oversight and regular review of the standards of its provision from module level to full qualification levels within the College. The College's

approach to monitoring and review is fit for purpose. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**



**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.47 The College's processes for curriculum design and validation processes include the involvement of external subject specialists with a view to securing the setting of UK threshold standards. Processes for checking that these standards are maintained include external examiners' and course consultants' reports which support the College's self-scrutiny through APR reports at programme and institutional level. Membership of LTAC-HE, the forum for discussion of operational matters impacting on standards, has recently changed to include representatives from all partner universities.

1.48 The College's guidance for internal validations explains that the purpose of the external panel member is to consider the equivalence of standards. It maintains a list of external panel members involved in validations and engages with staff to develop their understanding of the meaning of externality in curriculum development, review and delivery processes.

1.49 The majority of validation panels include an external specialist, the exceptions being some of those conducted by University of Lancaster who use their own staff. Events organised by the University of South Wales and the University of Cumbria use external specialists as panel members.

1.50 The team explored with the College its degree of confidence in its ability to meet and maintain academic standards. The two key factors identified were familiarity with the Quality Code (in particular Part A) and the work of examining boards which involved external examiners and course consultants. The engagement of programme leaders and teams with external examiners is continuous, since each external examiner may make a number of visits over the year. Likewise, there is continuing engagement with University of Lancaster's Collaborative Provision Teaching Committee which provides support to the College in maintaining an overview of standards.

1.51 External examiners' reports confirm that the academic standards achieved by the students are appropriate for the award and level of study as do course consultants' reports. In considering the College's response to an issue which arose in relation to the standards in the BA (Hons) Social Care, the team noted evidence that the College responds promptly and rigorously to such concerns. The team also found evidence of the College taking note of and responding appropriately at institutional level to concerns raised by some external examiners in relation to over-generous marking.

1.52 The team concludes that the Expectation is met. The risk is judged to be low, since the systems in place enable issues to be identified and resolved promptly.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.53 The College's responsibilities relating to the Expectations detailed in Part A of the Quality Code have all been met with low risk. There are no findings of good practice, and the team does not make any recommendations or affirmations.

1.54 The review team confirms that the College, in partnership with its awarding bodies and awarding organisation, maps higher education provision to the programme outcomes and external benchmarks associated with the FHEQ. Transparent and coherent academic frameworks and regulations are used to govern how credit and qualifications are awarded.

1.55 Definitive records for each programme and qualification approved by the respective awarding body or organisation are maintained, and these records constitute the reference point for all subsequent delivery, assessment, monitoring and review of higher education provision. These records are available to students.

1.56 Programmes are approved through the use of processes that ensure standards are set at appropriate levels within institutional frameworks, and academic credit is awarded where relevant learning outcomes are achieved through assessment.

1.57 On the basis of the documentation provided and meetings with staff and students, the review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards at the College **meets** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval**

#### **Findings**

2.1 The College's planning cycle for programme design and approval includes engagement with local employers, PSRBs where relevant, and other interests to ensure that provision is aligned with employer needs.

2.2 The review team considered a range of documentation relating to programme and curriculum design, and met senior staff, programme leaders, teaching staff, professional support staff, students and representative employers of students and graduates of the College.

2.3 In respect of provision designed by the College itself, the College takes responsibility for proposing the levels of programmes and modules within the FHEQ to the awarding body, in line with that body's processes for validation, revalidation and review. The team found that staff of the College pay appropriate attention to Subject Benchmark Statements and the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*, and that staff understand the precepts of programme design.

2.4 Strategic plans for future programmes are discussed at Academic Board in relation to the College's academic plan for the University Centre. Validation documents incorporate the business case, market demand, and programme-level details including module descriptors, programme specifications and appropriate external reference points, such as the Quality Code and any requirements of professional bodies. Students confirm that they are able to contribute to programme design and that their views are actively sought. Each new validation incorporates an equality impact assessment to ensure that inclusivity factors and principles are taken into consideration. External examiners contribute to the process by confirming that learning, teaching and assessment activities are consistent with the FHEQ and the sector norms.

2.5 The LTAC-HE considers summary reports of the key issues arising from external and internal reviews and the team found that it is generally successful in taking an effective overview of assessment issues in programme design. A major/minor amendment process is in place in respect of each awarding body whereby changes can be made to programmes without the need to wait until the next routine validation or review.

2.6 Although they are generally thorough and well prepared, validation documents do not systematically identify specific learning resources required for new and revalidated programmes. This poses a risk that there may be insufficient learning resources available to students for new provision. The outcomes of the National Student Survey in 2012-13 and 2013-14 show that student satisfaction with learning resources was significantly below the sector average, and in meeting students, the team heard of concerns relating to the provision of learning resources. This led the review team to the recommendation expressed in Expectation B4 that the College should ensure that learning resources necessary for programme delivery are consistently identified and provided.

2.7 The team found that foundation degree provision includes the development of skills for ensuring graduate employability as underpinning curriculum design, for instance in the FDA Early Childhood Studies and FDA Health and Personal Training.

2.8 The College is committed to the contribution that employers make to the design, development and approval of programmes. Employers spoke positively about their opportunities to influence programme design, and the team found evidence of numerous examples of employers from a variety of public and private sector bodies advising the College on programme and module design. The team found that the relationships with employers continued into programme delivery, with evidence of a highly productive relationship between individual employers and programme leaders including visits by guest speakers from local employers to enhance students' employability skills: students spoke highly of the contribution of guest speakers to their learning experience. The College's responsiveness to employer views in the development of the curriculum is **good practice**.

2.9 The team concludes that the College operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of higher education programmes, and that the Expectation is met. Noting its concern relating to the College's system for identifying resource needs, and in the context of the College's plans to grow the volume of higher education provision, the team formed the view that the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission***

**Findings**

2.10 The College has devolved responsibility for admission and selection of students to all of its higher education programmes. The basis for effective recruitment, selection and admission is a clearly articulated admissions policy supported by the College's Academic Regulations. Admissions policies are informed by the strategic priorities detailed in the Academic Plan, and the College's Academic Regulations include a complaints procedure specific to admissions processes. Entry requirements are determined at programme validation and revalidation events.

2.11 Recruitment, selection and admissions processes are carried out by staff in the College's professional services. A range of staff development opportunities are made available to admissions staff to ensure that those undertaking the admissions function are competent and trained to do so.

2.12 Programme Leaders work with admissions staff to best meet the needs of applicants. Interviewing applicants is widespread, particularly for those with non-traditional qualifications, and on some programmes it is universal. The admissions procedures outlined meet Expectation B2 and reflect the Indicators of sound practice.

2.13 The review team tested the operation and effectiveness of the admission, recruitment and selection procedures by talking to students and academic and support staff. They also considered the information produced for applicants and enquirers.

2.14 The College's processes for application and admission are clear and carefully followed. Students and staff confirm the value of individual interviews. Discussions with students confirm an accessible admissions process and that students have a good understanding of their programmes prior to commencement. There is a strong organisational commitment to diversity in the selection processes, with good support for students progressing from further education to higher education, for applicants with non-standard qualifications, and for those with disabilities. Individual needs are proactively supported to remove barriers prior to programme commencement: for instance, individual learner interviews with inclusion specialists and programme teams provide opportunities for information sharing and for the necessary support mechanisms to be put into place. Effective procedures are in place for identifying and supporting additional needs before admission, at interview, during enrolment and throughout the programme. Tailored early inductions are available for those with learning needs or disabilities. Well planned inductions are available for all learners evidencing close collaboration between curriculum areas and professional support services. Students are involved in the review of the admissions process via an induction survey. The review team identify the College's approach and commitment to diversity and inclusivity in the curriculum and the wider student experience as being **good practice**.

2.15 Entry requirements are clearly articulated on the College's website and in programme specifications, although the review team was unable to locate specifications for all programmes on the website. Communication of standard and non-standard entry requirements is transparent.

2.16 The admissions process was identified in the 2010 Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review as a feature of good practice. Monitoring and evaluation has resulted in improvements including an in-house admissions software system which directly links with UCAS and tracks all correspondence, helping students to make the transition from prospective to current student. The website has been improved to make it 'mobile-friendly' and more secure. The team found that the student view of website information and application processes was very positive.

2.17 The College accepts that analysis of retention data shows that some programmes have experienced and are experiencing low retention rates. Revalidation events have increased entry requirements in deliberate attempts to raise achievement and success rates. Programme Leaders have recommenced individual interviews to increase retention rates. Although the need to improve retention is acknowledged in the College's academic plan for the University Centre 2014, there is as yet little oversight of efforts to do so. The review team accordingly **recommends** that by September 2015 the College should further monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives to increase retention rates.

2.18 The team finds that the Expectation is met, but, noting the desirability of improving oversight of retention initiatives, it attributes a moderate level of risk to this Expectation.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

#### **Findings**

2.19 The College has an academic plan for its University Centre, a Curriculum Strategy and Business Plan, and an Organisational Development Plan. The aim of the Academic Plan is to develop and maintain an academic community of staff, students and wider stakeholders in 'scholarship, research, professional practice and knowledge transfer'. A key focus of the Organisational Development Plan is to encourage innovative approaches in learning, teaching and assessment.

2.20 A range of College activities aims to ensure that learning and teaching approaches are informed by reflection on professional practice and scholarship. These include a peer observation support scheme, a developing reflective practice network, an annual Teaching and Learning Conference to disseminate staff research and Higher Education Academy events. A Research and Scholarship Committee has been formed recently to encourage and shape staff/student research and a new post as Research and Scholarship Leader has been created. Small-scale action research projects are encouraged and published in the in-house journal *Vision*. Staff have support to attend conferences and benefit from the Research Grant scheme. Curricula vitae of staff are approved by university partners before they may teach on a programme. The College provides support for staff to become members of the Higher Education Academy and to gain higher-level qualifications. Training sessions enable staff to develop expertise in using new learning technologies and on work-based learning/ personal development planning. A course consultant from University of Lancaster drew favourable attention to the variety of staff development activities provided by the College, while the annual monitoring report for the University of Central Lancashire in respect of 2012-13 noted that College staff find the University's staff development activities valuable.

2.21 Since the 2010 Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review the College has appointed a Head of E-learning and has a dedicated team including a Digital Resources Software Developer and two Learning Technologists. Recent e-learning developments include: DigiPals, where student volunteers/practitioners support staff in implementing technological advancements in the classroom; and an iLab with flexible learning zones, 400 iPads for loan and an iStore for loaning equipment such as visualisers, interactive tables, cameras and dictaphones.

2.22 Programme handbooks are a key source of information and the College provides a template for these. The VLE is widely used by students to access module-based information; the lack of consistently applied standards for module content led the team to the recommendation under Expectation C that the College should establish and implement minimum standards for the content of the VLE.

2.23 A Student Organiser provides College-specific information and there is a student handbook for work-based learning. A Student Partnership Agreement exists to help students understand their responsibilities in engaging with learning opportunities, processes that are supported further through the College's personal tutor system.

2.24 Strategic approaches to technology in learning and teaching are developed through a number of initiatives, including: Changing the Learning Landscape partnership programme; the Learning Wheel model; Open Badges; Community Open Online Courses; and Reflective Practice projects.

2.25 Staff development activities were described as varied by one University of Lancaster course consultant and the usefulness of University of Central Lancashire staff development events was apparent. The team noted high levels of student satisfaction for tutor support. The College has undertaken a recent access audit though some access difficulties for students with mobility difficulties were noted in the 2013 APR overview to University of Lancaster.

2.26 The College produces a range of performance monitoring data to enable monitoring of attendance, retention, achievement and progression. Academic Board receives and discusses summaries/analyses of higher education awards. Student Engagement Officers have been in post for two years and assist academic staff in monitoring and supporting students. Following a pilot, retention on engineering programmes improved from 85 per cent to 94 per cent: the School of Health, Science and Technology has now appointed a dedicated pastoral tutor who works with students, programme teams and Student Engagement Officers.

2.27 In discussion with staff and students the review team explored several areas including: the inter-connection of the various strategic documents; strategies for monitoring and evaluating retention; College views on National Student Survey outcomes; the impact of staff absence on the student learning experience and staff workloads; and processes for sharing good practice and for the development of staff. With students, the team discussed issues relating to learning resources and academic support (the VLE, personal tutors, programme literature and handbooks, module descriptors, the work-based learning handbook). Learning resource matters and College views on National Student Survey outcomes are discussed under Expectation B4; all others are considered here.

2.28 Staff clarified that the strategic approach to learning and teaching emanated from the Strategic Plan 2014-15, from which flowed the Academic Plan and the Higher Education Curriculum Strategy, supported in turn by the Human Resources and Organisational Development Strategy.

2.29 Staff outlined the procedures for allocating and monitoring work placements and students confirmed that these work effectively for them. In addition, students praised the exceptional support provided by their tutors, the guidance available for those with disabilities, and the provision of information about their programmes, initially through the website, their handbooks and then through reiteration during their studies.

2.30 In considering retention statistics over three years the team noted the upwards trend in non-completion rates from 2011-12 to 2012-13; discussion at the University of South Wales institutional approval event on how issues around completion rates were being addressed; and a figure of 70 per cent for the proportion of students entering programmes due to complete in 2013-14 who achieved their qualification. Staff spoke of the positive impact of the recently established Student Engagement Team and the move to more holistic support strategies. While recognising the challenges of changing student demographics to which the College drew attention, the team noted low levels of retention on some courses, prompting the recommendation in Expectation B2 that the College carry out further monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of initiatives to increase retention rates.

2.31 A number of documents within the institutional submission gave insight into the challenges of staffing the College's varied portfolio of higher education programmes: several validations with conditions for additional staffing or for further development of staff; the



impact of staff sickness on small teams in terms of the quality of course delivery and preparation for validation; and the pressures on school-level managers observed by University of Lancaster course consultants. The College has recognised the need to reorganise smaller teams into larger programme teams and is in the process of appointing a further tier of academic subject leaders. It has also established a working group to re-examine principles relating to staff workload.

2.32 Examples of opportunities for professional and scholarly development were cited by many members of staff met. Processes for staff induction were also confirmed, and it was evident that the College's peer observation scheme was a successful and established mechanism for sharing good practice. This enabled the team to identify, as **good practice**, the range of scholarly and professional development activities undertaken by staff and the consequent enrichment of the student learning experience.

2.33 The team concludes that the Expectation is met and judges the associated level of risk to be low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.34 The infrastructure for student support includes personal tutors, Student Engagement Officers, Inclusive Studies and Disability Services and International Support, in addition to finance, careers, wellbeing, library and accommodation services. Students receive a student support brochure identifying key contacts. Support is also provided for placement learning, including a Higher Education Placement Officer and work-based learning tutors.

2.35 Initiatives such as the Beehive, the Hub and the Students as Scholars scheme enhance the infrastructure for students to develop skills for academic, personal and professional development. Careers guidance within the College is undergoing development and currently provides individual careers guidance interviews alongside advice and support for job applications, curricula vitae, personal statements, job searches and interview techniques.

2.36 Resources are allocated across the College through the business planning cycle. The suitability and sufficiency of learning resources are considered in review and approval processes and discussed within programme committees and school boards. There are several examples of technology supporting and enhancing learning, which are discussed further under Expectation B3.

2.37 The results of student surveys and the outcomes of the National Student Survey in 2012-13 revealed a need for further investment in relation to learning resources and for the development of students' perceptions of a 'learning resource'. In the 2013-14 National Student Survey the outcome for learning resources improved by one per cent but was 16 per cent below the sector average.

2.38 The Curriculum Strategy (May 2014) highlighted a number of issues, including budget cuts likely to have a detrimental effect on National Student Survey scores, complaints about the lack of practical facilities, specialist resources, learning resources and social space, and specific school/programme-based needs in Law, Engineering and Sports. The team noted that validation events may set conditions relating to learning resources, for instance software and specialist space for the BSc (Hons) Applied Psychology and dedicated studios for the FdA and BA (Hons) Graphic Design. However, although it had been a requirement of the validation of the BSc (Hons) Sports Coaching and Performance, software was not in place in time for the first student enrolments, requiring students to travel to the University of South Wales to access necessary resources. A range of needs in relation to specialist resources has been highlighted in external examiners' reports: better campus access to Building Information Modelling software for staff and students on Construction programmes; the importance of providing up-to-date facilities and resources in the Textiles/Fashion/Design area; and improvements in laboratory support for engineering practical work (included in reports for three years). Similar observations were included in University of Lancaster course consultant reports, including insufficient subject specialist base rooms/dedicated studio bases in Art and Design, and the College's APR overview report to University of Lancaster identified a lack of suitable specialised equipment within Counselling programmes. The University of South Wales institutional approval event asked the College to provide 'details of action taken to reduce the gap between student expectations and the service on offer with regard to learning resources' but concluded that

resources met the educational needs to students on the University's programmes. The College's 2012-13 Higher Education Action Plan aimed, in relation to subject-specific resources, to develop students' perception of the meaning of learning resource.

2.39 The College is preparing an action plan in relation to a recent audit by Jisc of learning space. The main findings of this were: insufficient space to support all types of learning (especially collaborative and silent areas); the limitations of the VLE as a portal (with access and the way in which it is populated being inconsistent); and stretched provision of computer workstations. Recent improvements in response to student feedback have included a silent study area, provision of tablet computers, a prayer room and allocation of part of the library's books budget to student representatives. The student submission welcomes these actions and endorses the success of all but the library project, but takes the view that more silent study areas are needed. Improvements planned for 2014-15 include: more PC/study space; improved workshop space for Art and Design; and, from February 2015, a new Sports Centre. Specialist purchases have been made across a number of curriculum areas and memoranda of understanding are being established with local employers to enhance the studio space available to students.

2.40 The transition from foundation to honours degree is challenging for some students and participation in summer bridging programmes is encouraged, where relevant. Careers advice services now feature more prominently on the VLE and the effectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns is endorsed in the student submission: numbers accessing careers guidance during 2013-14 increased from 34 to 366. University of Lancaster course consultants endorse the Reflective Practitioner module in helping students document their 'experience, trajectory and potential', the Beehive initiative, for its 'beneficial employability opportunities', and the Hub, for the additional support and enrichment of learning it provides.

2.41 The review team considered a number of issues with regard to learning resources in several meetings with staff and students: identification and prioritisation of these within academic management and monitoring structures and business planning cycles; ease of access to, and adequacy of, general and specialist equipment/space and library resources; below-average National Student Survey results and the impact of these on plans for future growth of student numbers; views on the VLE and students' perceptions of learning resources; and the role of professional service and support departments. In addition, the team explored the relationship and impact of the range of e-learning initiatives, and the experience of students' transitions from further to higher education and from foundation degrees to top-up degrees.

2.42 Students were generally very positive about the growth of library and technological resources in recent years (laptops, e-resources, the iLab and technology drop-in centre) and observed that space for silent and social learning was improving. Praise for the quality of the learning support they received, and the ways in which they were nurtured as individuals and prepared for employment, was unanimous. The team explored the reference in the student submission to the VLE being 'openly and regularly criticised', establishing that concerns had been particularly acute during the transition from a 'model 1 VLE' to 'model 2 VLE', that there had been improvements to the design of the interface and that, from the students' perspective, the VLE had improved over the last 12 to 18 months. It was apparent, however, that some tutors used the VLE more extensively than others and that students would welcome a more consistent approach. The team recognised the range of e-learning initiatives introduced in recent years, but found the effectiveness of these hard to judge from the differing responses provided, and concluded that their impact was still to be assessed fully and capitalised on throughout the College's higher education community. This gives rise to the **recommendation** that by September 2015 the College should develop a strategic and consistent approach to e-learning initiatives and to the exploitation of the VLE as a major learning and teaching tool.

2.43 The team explored how learning resources were identified, prioritised and allocated through the College's business planning cycle. Several examples of recent improvements to specialist resource provision were given, including within arts, engineering, sports, counselling and complementary therapies. In considering trends in National Student Survey outcomes, staff commented that low results in relation to learning resources might in part be explained by unrealistic student expectations (for example, of 24/7 access), by variability in teachers' use of technology or by students' lack of awareness of the full extent of resources provided. While assurances were made that validation processes capture learning resource needs which are then realised through the business planning cycle, it was clear to the team from the College's own documentation and from external reports that ensuring adequate specialist learning resources within its higher education provision had been challenging. This leads to the **recommendation** that by September 2015 the College ensures that learning resources necessary for programme delivery are consistently identified and provided.

2.44 Students believe that employability is 'carefully considered and catered for', though identified a gap in the development of skills for self-employment and freelancing. The College has therefore been working to develop opportunities for entrepreneurship and self-employment, recognising the challenges of connecting with micro, small and medium-size enterprises. Developments include working with Bootstrap Enterprise to develop students' entrepreneurial skills ; the Enterprise Champion, a post funded by the RBS Inspiring Enterprise programme that seeks to establish a number of new business in Blackburn over the next year; and the launch of a Student Enterprise club in 2014 to support their preparation for self-employment. The 2013 and 2014 Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education surveys showed that nine out of 10 graduates were in full-time or part-time work or in further study.

2.45 Meetings with staff confirmed that employers' views and employability issues were central to curriculum design and delivery and that staff had regular opportunities to engage with employers. Students confirmed that their programmes were effective in embedding employability skills and that arrangements relating to work placements worked smoothly. The team identified as **good practice** the development of students' employability in the curriculum and in teaching learning and assessment, enabling students to gain real workplace experience.

2.46 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met, since student development is placed clearly at the heart of teaching and support at the College. The associated level of risk is judged as moderate, given the potential for variability in students' learning experience and the need to ensure its continuing integrity.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.47 The College articulates its commitment to fostering a partnership relationship with the Students' Union within its Student Engagement Strategy. It seeks to create a higher education experience that is student-centred and responsive to the needs of students as individuals. The Student Partnership Agreement 2014 outlines expectations in terms of what students may expect from the College, what is expected of each student and what the local Students' Union seeks to provide. This document has replaced the Student Charter. The Personal Tutorial and Engagement Model further supports the enhancement of students' academic, personal and social development.

2.48 The College values the student contribution and employs a variety of mechanisms to collect student views. Deliberative structures and arrangements create and maintain an environment within which staff and students engage in discussions to bring about enhancement of the educational experience. Other means of gathering feedback include focus groups, module evaluations, Principal's Breakfast Meetings, the National Student Survey, and the 'Stop and Ask' scheme. The policies and procedures of the College enable Expectation B5 to be met.

2.49 The review team evaluated the steps taken by the College to engage students as partners by reviewing documentation including: the Student Partnership Agreement, the Student Engagement Strategy, and minutes of school boards, programme committees, LTAC-HE, the Academic Board and the Corporation Board. The team met students and staff to discuss the extent to which students feel able to contribute to quality assurance and enhancement in a meaningful way.

2.50 Students are represented throughout the committee structures and attend programme committees, School Boards, LTAC-HE, Academic Board and Corporation Board. Students expressed satisfaction that these arrangements provide for all learner voices to be heard. The team found that students are happy with the efficacy of the student representative system as a means of raising issues and closing the loop, and that staff value the student representative systems as a means of improving the quality of the student experience.

2.51 The Students' Union plays an important role in raising awareness of the issues of the student body. Students are made aware of the role of student representatives as part of induction. Together with the Student Engagement Team, the NUS provides training for all elected student representatives, with training resources being accessible via the Students' Union Moodle page. The effectiveness of training is evaluated in the Student Representative Forum. Issues and matters arising are discussed at the Student Representative Forums which take place every month, led by the Students' Union President. Students and student representatives are supported in their understanding of the purpose of representation via the Student Organiser, Programme Handbooks and a detailed Student Representative Handbook. The Student Engagement Team is involved in all induction programmes for newly enrolling students. The team formed the view that the work of the Student Engagement Team demonstrates the commitment of the College to student representation and engagement.

2.52 Staff and students confirm that deliberate steps are taken to gather module and programme feedback. Module evaluations generally take the form of electronic surveys issued via the VLE; the College is aware of and taking action to address technological issues relating to these surveys. Students contribute to APR feedback and annual monitoring reviews and to programme validation and revalidations, although the review team saw no evidence in relation to the effectiveness of their involvement.

2.53 Feedback and National Student Survey outcomes are considered throughout the College's deliberative structures including at programme committees, school boards and LTAC-HE. Actions follow from this consideration, for example a student-led publication resulted from issues raised regarding timely feedback. Effective strategic oversight tracks the completion of agreed actions. LTAC-HE exercises oversight of a clear audit trail throughout the deliberative structures which facilitates evaluation of impact. Students are satisfied with the effectiveness of representation structures.

2.54 The team found a commitment from staff at all levels of the organisational structure to listen to students and to take deliberate steps to ensure they are at the heart of what the organisation does. The Student Engagement Team is valued both by staff and students for its active role in enhancing student representation and engagement. The recently introduced 'Student Partnership Agreement' articulates the College's commitment to work in mutual partnership with students.

2.55 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met with an associated low level of risk.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning***

**Findings**

2.56 The College is responsible for setting examinations and coursework according to the requirements laid out in the validation documents as approved by the awarding body for University of Lancaster programmes, Pearson BTEC programmes and some programmes of the University of Cumbria. For University of Central Lancashire programmes and the remaining University of South Wales programmes, the awarding body is responsible for setting assessment requirements.

2.57 Assessment policies, regulations and processes that govern the assessment of students are specified by the awarding bodies. The College's Academic Regulations have been designed to ensure that outcomes are delivered successfully at levels 4, 5 and 6. These regulations also provide assessment guidelines to be administered in keeping with the requirements of the programme and awarding body.

2.58 The College's approach to assessment, working within the frameworks set by its awarding bodies and, for Pearson programmes, within the framework stipulated in the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment, allows the Expectation to be met.

2.59 The team reviewed a range of documentary evidence. Programme and module handbooks reflect awarding body academic frameworks and regulations. The College's VLE provides links to awarding body academic regulations, to ensure there is a clear understanding of the requirements for the award of credit.

2.60 The methods of assessment are approved as part of validation and reviewed annually by programme teams in their APR reports, and by external examiners and course consultants. Programme teams are required to reflect the principles and procedures identified within the regulations while facilitating innovation in assessment where appropriate. In some courses live briefs are used for assessment tasks, where students undertake activities for employers that help to ensure the currency and relevance of assessments. Students are positive about this approach.

2.61 External examiners formally approve examination papers, advise on coursework and comment on the adequacy and appropriateness of assessment practices. In addition, programme teams liaise with their appropriate university contact for additional advice. Before assessment briefs are issued to students they are validated by the programme team for their efficacy in demonstrating learning outcomes, academic level, implied volume of work, grading criteria and clarity, and to ensure they allow equal opportunities for all students to demonstrate achievement.

2.62 Student work is initially marked and moderated by College tutors; except for Pearson programmes there is then shared moderation with the awarding body before samples are sent to external examiners. External examiners' reports confirm their satisfaction with examining board procedures and with the achievement of learning outcomes.

2.63 The College's Academic Registrar provides guidance and support to programme leaders on compliance with the assessment requirements of the various awarding bodies. Staff teaching and assessing higher education programmes receive appropriate updating training in the requirements of those bodies.

2.64 Students whom the team met reported that they are generally satisfied with assessment briefs, assessment feedback and assessment criteria. However, some students commented that the timeliness of the return of assessed work and moderation processes feedback were inconsistent and that greater priority was apparently given to students on year three of their programme. The team therefore **recommends** that by May 2015 the College ensures consistent application of its policy for the timeliness of feedback on assessed work.

2.65 The team found that the College has suitable assessment processes for students with protected characteristics. Processes for the accreditation of prior learning are implemented in accordance with the requirements of awarding bodies and the awarding organisation.

2.66 The College has a clear strategy for assessment which gives a shared set of principles across the course teams. Assessment methods are appropriately designed or approved by the awarding body to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. Criteria and expectations for assessment are clearly presented to students, and feedback received is regarded by students as being helpful, although the policy on the timing of feedback is inconsistently applied. Cross-marking and moderation assure standards are met and the regular review of programmes, which draws on evidence from external examiners, module reviews and student feedback, provides evidence of appropriate assessment practices within the College.

2.67 The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



## **Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

#### **Findings**

2.68 The College's responsibilities in relation to external examiners are detailed in its agreements with its awarding bodies. For University of Lancaster programmes, the College nominates external examiners who are then approved and appointed by the University. All other partners source and appoint their own external examiners. The College's Academic Regulations outline processes for the consideration of external examiners' reports which are through programme leaders, programme committees and APRs overseen by LTAC-HE. Reports are also reviewed by Heads of Schools and the Higher Education Quality Unit. School-based summaries are prepared and the Quality Unit provides a general overview. Summaries are considered by LTAC-HE and a report is made to Academic Board.

2.69 External examiner report templates follow the guidance provided in the Quality Code. Reports are made available to student representatives through programme committees; other students may request access to the report for their programme from their programme leader.

2.70 The review team scrutinised a cross section of reports and found that the College's external examiners confirmed sound practice in all areas including comparability of standards and assessment; that issues in previous reports had been (or were being) addressed; and that examiners had been provided with sufficient evidence to enable them to discharge their duties. There was also evidence that problems within specific programmes were dealt with effectively when these arose, for example issues concerning standards in level 6 modules. Reports identify good practice and opportunities to enhance the quality of students' learning opportunities and also inform and underpin validation and review processes.

2.71 Recurring issues included those relating to consistency and levels of marking as discussed under Expectation A3.4, the potential negative impact of staffing issues as discussed under Expectation B3, and the need to provide more timely information of dates of meetings of examining boards to external examiners to ensure their attendance. In discussion, the College confirmed that invitations had been sent out in January 2015, for summer 2015 award boards, by both the College and University of Lancaster.

2.72 Minutes of programme committees and school boards indicate consideration of external examiners' reports and APR reports include action plans in response to issues raised in these. The College has acknowledged that the attendance of examiners at examination boards in July 2013 was lower than previously with an action point in the College's 2012-13 Higher Education Self-evaluation Action Plan to discuss and increase attendance. The team noted that external examiners in 2014 have continued to identify problems in relation to the communication of changes to dates of examining boards.

2.73 The review team tested the College's approach to evaluating and responding to external examiners' reports by reviewing minutes of programme committees, school boards, LTAC-HE and Academic Board, and also by reading APR reports. Although the team found it hard to judge the effectiveness of discussion of these matters by programme committees, discussion of issues arising from external examiners' reports was apparent at School Board level and within LTAC-HE and Academic Board minutes. APR action plans showed how issues were followed through within individual programmes. Generic issues were collated by each of the four schools for 2012-13, though these lacked criticality due to their substantially

similar content. In respect of 2013-14, an overall response from the College has taken its place. University of Lancaster's analysis of themes and issues arising from the 2013-14 external examiners' reports was a comprehensive report identifying strong practice in many programmes alongside areas for consideration and recurring issues.

2.74 The team also explored how programme leaders made their response to individual external examiners and found that this was variable in that some received a copy of the relevant APR report while others did not. University of Lancaster noted, in their 2013-14 overview report, the need to ensure that all external examiners receive an adequate response. It is the College's intention that, from 2015, each programme leader's individual responses to external examiners will be included in the APR report and that all examiners will routinely receive a copy of this.

2.75 The team explored students' familiarity with the role of external examiners and their reports. Students confirmed that reports were discussed in programme committees but most were unaware of the name and position of the external examiner for their programme. The team could not determine, on the basis of the evidence provided, how the guidance in the Academic Regulations for providing students with information about their external examiners was followed through in practice, although it noted that handbooks for University of Central Lancashire programmes contain this information.

2.76 In considering the manner in which the College makes use of the services of external examiners, the review team accordingly **recommends** that by May 2015 the College ensures timely notification to external examiners of dates of examining boards and systematic responses to their reports.

2.77 The review team concludes that this Expectation is met. Since the College has identified the need to improve the timing of information provided to examiners with regard to examination boards as a recurring issue each year since 2010-11, the associated level of risk is judged to be moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.78 The College's Academic Board has strategic oversight of all programme monitoring. Detailed and operational matters are discussed and addressed routinely at the LTAC-HE which generally meets four times per year and which is responsible for monitoring all Programme Reviews. The key component of the programme review process is the APR report.

2.79 The College's Academic Regulations outline how the oversight of programme monitoring and review is managed. Annual monitoring starts with the APR which analyses external examiners' reports and, where relevant, course consultants' reports, and includes data on student achievement, retention and progression. The programme team action plan which flows from the APR is monitored by school boards. APRs inform the annual higher education self-evaluation and action plan that addresses College-wide issues. This, in turn, informs the annual institutional reports written for each partner university. Furthermore, APRs inform periodic reviews of programmes.

2.80 External expertise is used in monitoring and review processes. Students are involved through representation and feedback. Programme teams are required to report on their response to conditions and make recommendations to the Academic Board, who consider and report back, while reports from programme teams and responses from Academic Board are also considered by LTAC-HE.

2.81 The College has a management structure and processes in place to enable oversight of its higher education provision and meet the review requirements of awarding bodies, and therefore allows the Expectation to be met.

2.82 The team reviewed documentary evidence including minutes from meetings of the Higher Education Management Team and from LTAC-HE, and questioned staff in meetings about the process of annual monitoring review and oversight by the College.

2.83 The team confirmed that the processes used to monitor and review programmes of study are as described in the Academic Regulations. As a further means of securing standards, the College uses its 'courses in action' process, monitored by Academic Board, to address programmes regarded as underperforming because of, for instance, low retention and achievement rates. By considering a range of evidence including the amended APR report template for 2014 supported by staff training, the APR review day also attended by staff from University of Lancaster's Collaborative Provision Teaching Committee, and the Jisc-funded research into the development of e-tools to enhance the APR writing process as disseminated in the College's in-house journal *Vision*, the team confirmed that the College evaluates these processes and supports its staff appropriately.

2.84 In considering the preparation of APR reports, the team found that a number of reports failed to identify the enhancement initiatives and that there was no reference to a College-wide collective approach to enhancement. Furthermore, the team found several errors and inconsistencies in reports including incorrect presentation of programme structures and inconsistent inclusion of external examiners' reports.

2.85 Periodic review of programmes is a component of the validation process. In completing the periodic review the panel takes into consideration the views of students on the programme and employers, and is also informed by previous APRs. The outcomes of periodic review are reported to LTAC-HE and are used to inform the development of new programmes. In discussion with academic staff and managers, the review team concluded that this process was effective in securing standards.

2.86 The College has systems to enable the oversight and regular review of the standards of its provision from module level to the full qualification levels within the College. The review team noted that at programme level reviews are undertaken annually, and for the awarding organisation programme periodic reviews take place every three years. The team found that the involvement of students in reviews is extensive and consistent with the College's strategy for student voice, and contributes to improving the learning experience.

2.87 The team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

**Findings**

2.88 The College's complaints procedure outlines the process that students can follow if they have an issue or complaint. The College's academic appeals procedures detailed in its Academic Regulations apply to University of Lancaster and Pearson programmes. The awarding body's own academic appeals processes apply to all other programmes. References to both complaints and appeals procedures are included in programme handbooks and the Student Organiser, and are embedded in programme inductions.

2.89 The student submission acknowledges deliberate steps between the Students' Union and the Academic Registrar to raise awareness of complaints and appeals policies, which has been highlighted in the student submission and the Higher Education Self-Evaluation Action Plan 2013-2014.

2.90 The review team found that the policies and procedures of the College allow Expectation B9 to be met, and considered how the processes outlined above operate in practice by considering examples provided by the College and by meeting staff and students.

2.91 All complaints and appeals are routinely monitored within the committee infrastructure, by Academic Board and LTAC-HE. Terms of reference clearly outline the remit of the Academic Appeals Panel. Detailed appeals reports enable effective senior oversight. In expressing satisfaction with the College's complaints and appeals procedures, students confirmed that they are described in programme handbooks, the Student Organiser and at programme induction. Nevertheless the review team noted evidence of an occasion on which a College programme handbook and an awarding body handbook gave contradictory information about which appeals procedure was applicable to students.

2.92 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met with an associated low level of risk.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.93 The College takes responsibility for managing its relationships with employers in respect of student work placements provided on foundation degrees. The College articulates its commitment to developing the employability and work readiness of its students through its Strategic Plan and associated devolved planning processes.

2.94 In developing programmes designed to reflect local need the College adopts a strategic approach to delivering learning opportunities with employers of students and of graduates. Memoranda of understanding in place with some placement providers are clearly understood by all parties. The College has developed a common framework of policies and procedures designed to manage, monitor and ensure the quality of learning and safety arrangements of students in an external working environment.

2.95 The review team scrutinised the evidence in the self-evaluation document, the work placement policies and associated documentation and handbooks. In addition, the team held a series of meetings with senior, teaching and professional support staff, employers and students to discuss the organisation and management of work-based learning.

2.96 Work-based learning is monitored by programme teams and forms part of the assessment of foundation degrees. The assessment of work-based learning modules and the maintenance of academic standards are undertaken by the staff on the programme and are reviewed as an integral part of the APR. Some employers are undertaking training in assessment at the College so that they can further develop their role.

2.97 Students studying towards foundation degrees confirmed that they undertake at least 120 hours on work placements and that they value their work experience very highly. Staff, students and employers whom the review team met were able to provide good examples of student progression into work, leading on from programmes of study. The team heard that students had no difficulties with finding work placements or volunteering opportunities, and that the College was committed to supporting them in the workplace. Students are provided with a useful placement handbook and employers confirmed that they receive a helpful employers' handbook.

2.98 Employability and enterprise are supported by a central College team, including a dedicated Higher Education Placement Officer and an 'Entrepreneur in Residence', to expand opportunities to engage with employers and provide opportunities for students. There is a wide range of employer forums and networks, and employers confirmed that the College, through the effective use of a database, is able to closely match students to suitable work placements.

2.99 Employers spoke highly of the effective communication and the breadth and diversity of engagement activities they undertake with the College. They considered the College to be innovative in its commitment to student employability and responsive to local needs. The widespread integration of work-based learning through active and extensive collaboration with employer networks is **good practice**. The evidence from students and employers confirmed that there are consistent, robust and well understood arrangements for

the oversight and management of work-based learning opportunities and that work-based learning makes a positive contribution to the students' learning experience. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees***

### **Findings**

2.100 This Expectation is not applicable because the College does not offer research degrees.



## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.101 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the Expectations for this judgement area were met. The associated level of risk in each case was judged to be low except for Expectations B1, B2, B4 and B7 for which the level of risk was judged to be moderate.

2.102 There are five features of good practice: the College's responsiveness to employer views in the development of the curriculum; its approach towards and commitment to diversity and inclusivity in the curriculum and in the wider student experience; the range of scholarly and professional development activities undertaken by staff and the consequent enrichment of the student learning experience; the development of students' employability in the curriculum and in teaching, learning and assessment, enabling students to gain real workplace experience; and the widespread integration of work-based learning through active and extensive collaboration with employer networks.

2.103 The review team made five recommendations relating to the quality of learning opportunities. The first relates to the desirability of evaluating the effectiveness of initiatives to increase retention rates. The second follows from the perceived lack of a strategic approach to the development of e-learning. The third concerns the need to ensure that necessary learning resources are consistently identified and provided. The fourth relates to the implementation of the College's policy for the timeliness of feedback on assessed work. The fifth and final recommendation concerns the timeliness of communication between the College and external examiners. In addition, the recommendation made in Part C relating to the implementation of minimum standards for the College's VLE is also applicable to the quality of learning opportunities.

2.104 The review team therefore concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

### 3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### **Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision**

#### **Findings**

3.1 The College's website presents information about its mission, vision, values and strategic ambitions. It has been redeveloped recently and is now intended to be mobile-friendly with appropriate and secure access to a range of social media features. The prospectus is available in print and online and details relevant information for prospective and current students and their advisers, including programme information, support services information, and a range of factual information relating to the student experience. Students were aware of and familiar with the Student Partnership Agreement which sets out bi-partite responsibilities and is provided to students at induction.

3.2 Additional information relating to policies such as those concerning equality and diversity, the complaints procedure and standing orders for governance were accessible on the website.

3.3 The College's website is easy to navigate and there are effective systems for managing the website and paper-based information content which are fully understood by teaching and professional support staff. Staff are clear regarding version control of documents and the appropriate signing-off protocols which are managed by the Higher Education Marketing Manager.

3.4 A recent website innovation has been the facility to track student applications and keep applicants up to date on an individual basis. Students were very positive about this feature, but less positive about the usefulness of the website after enrolment.

3.5 The College's awarding bodies stipulate the minimum requirements for the College regarding the production of information about its higher education provision. Each programme leaflet is publicised on the website, and contains an overview of its academic level and of programme content. The team found inconsistent availability of programme specifications on the College's website, and in particular found that those for Pearson programmes were unavailable.

3.6 In discussions with programme leaders and teaching staff, the review team heard that programme leaders have oversight of content and that heads of school undertake the final signoff, but found a lack of awareness of the variability of content and style of programme handbooks across the higher education provision. Teaching staff stated that information is consistent for all students albeit presented in different ways, and the College has standard, albeit inconsistently used, templates for programme handbooks. Nevertheless the team found that there is considerable variability in the information provided in programme handbooks and that students have little awareness of programme handbooks, although they expressed more awareness of module handbooks. Despite having heard from programme leaders that reading lists were to be found in programme handbooks including those of University of Lancaster, the review team found little evidence of reading lists within the handbooks, apart from those relating to provision of the University of Central Lancashire.

Accordingly the team **recommends** that by July 2015 the College should ensure that the information in student handbooks is consistent and complete.

3.7 In discussion with staff, the team perceived a lack of clarity regarding the designated roles in the College with responsibilities for the development and management of the VLE and for determining the choice of platform for the availability of information, whether the web, the intranet, a shared drive or the VLE. Senior staff stated that the strategic responsibility was the remit of the blended learning team, while other staff believed that the responsibility was that of student services staff and programme leaders.

3.8 Although students expressed satisfaction with the level and nature of programme-related information available on the VLE, the review team was unable to confirm the availability of such information. Following discussions with a wide range of teaching and professional support staff, the team was led to understand that there is no process for establishing minimum content for the VLE and no audit of content across the higher education provision, although programme leaders have access to all module pages on the VLE and have informal responsibility for monitoring content. Students expressed concern about the variability of content, late uploading of materials, lack of content in some programme areas, and the perceived unreliability of the VLE. The review team accordingly **recommends** that by July 2015 the College should establish and implement minimum standards for the content of the VLE.

3.9 The team concludes that the Expectation is met and that the associated level of risk is moderate due to the insufficiency of processes for monitoring the quality of sources of information.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.10 The review team found that the College consistently provides accessible and clear information for the public about its higher education provision, and has developed systems and procedures for designing and publishing information for a variety of stakeholders, leading to the availability of paper-based and electronic information for current and future students. The review team recognises this information as being clear and appropriate.

3.11 The College provides information for students enrolled on its programmes via programme and module handbooks and on its VLE. Although the College believes that all necessary information is available in its handbooks, the team found considerable variability in the information provided and a lack of oversight of content. The review team accordingly recommends that by July 2015 the College should ensure that the information in student handbooks is consistent and complete.

3.12 The team found no process for establishing minimum content for the VLE and no audit of content across the College's higher education provision, and accordingly recommends that by July 2015 the College should establish and implement minimum standards for the content of the VLE.

3.13 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 The College's strategic approach to enhancing the student learning experience is embedded in the culture of continuous improvement within several areas, including governance and committee structures, staff development and engagement with industry and employers. This is supported by the College's Strategic Plan and Quality Strategy which set out the College's commitment to enhancement at a strategic level.

4.2 Although the College does not have a formal enhancement strategy, its HE Academic Plan offers priorities for its Higher Education Curriculum Strategy and the review team was able to identify the College's enhancement approach through the meetings it held with staff, students and external stakeholders. These meetings provided the team with information which supported the College policies, committee structures and practices for enhancement and allowed the team to conclude that the College has a set of strategic aims and policies that, taken together, allow the Expectation to be met.

4.3 The review team additionally examined documentary evidence provided in strategy and planning documents and meeting notes, and raised questions in meetings, focusing on how enhancement initiatives were managed to form a strategic approach at College level.

4.4 The College claims that enhancement initiatives are planned and systematically integrated; academic teaching staff confirmed during staff meetings that a number of initiatives were underway with the aim of enhancing student learning opportunities, for example through teaching staff undertaking research and scholarly activities relating to their subject areas. However, in evaluating the manner in which approaches to enhancement had been considered at different levels within the College, the team found a lack of oversight to the College's enhancement activities.

4.5 Quality assurance processes are intended to be used to inform enhancement initiatives, principally through the APR process. The review team concluded that these processes provided a foundation for enhancement initiatives which, if systematically planned and evaluated, would usefully inform the College's overall strategic approach to enhancement. The team therefore **recommends** that the College establish a clear relationship between its higher education priorities and its enhancement practices.

4.6 The College's pursuit of enhancement is evident in the range of current initiatives, which in turn is helping the College to develop and reinforce an ethos in its higher education team that expects and encourages the enhancement of student learning opportunities. This is reported through the annual monitoring processes and overseen by the Higher Education Management Team, Academic Board and LTAC-HE.

4.7 The team formed the view that relevant sections of Part B of the Quality Code are incorporated into the working practices of the College. The College has systems to disseminate good practice and make use of its review mechanisms to identify opportunities for improvement. A range of enhancement initiatives linked to the College's various strategic intentions is ongoing. The review team has confidence that the College is progressing effectively to fully embed its strategy for enhancement.

4.8 The review team concludes that the Expectation in respect of enhancement is met and that the level of risk is moderate, because of the lack of a well-founded relationship between priorities and practice in respect of enhancement.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.9 Although the College does not have a formal enhancement strategy, its Higher Education Academic Plan offers priorities for its curriculum strategy; the review team was able to identify the College's enhancement approach and to conclude that the College has a set of strategic aims and policies in relation to enhancement.

4.10 However, in evaluating the manner in which approaches to enhancement had been considered at different levels within the College, the team found a lack of oversight to the College's enhancement activities and accordingly recommends that the College establish a relationship between the College's higher education priorities and its enhancement practices.

4.11 The College has systems to disseminate good practice and a range of enhancement initiatives that are linked to the College's various strategic intentions. The review team has confidence that the College is progressing effectively to fully embed its strategy for enhancement. The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The College outlines its commitment to developing the employability and work readiness of students through its Strategic Plan and the University Centre at Blackburn College Action Plan. Higher education provision focuses on vocationally relevant programmes that meet the needs of students and employers in key areas such as finance, marketing, leadership and management, and in high employment sectors such as teaching, public services, health and social care. Emphasis on employability has been embedded through the development of foundation degrees.

5.2 Engaging with employers is central to this mission. The College has an extensive and well developed infrastructure for employer liaison, the strategic development of partnerships with employers and their involvement in curriculum design and development. Over 4,000 employers support students in their studies (since April 2013, 600 new companies have been engaged) and more than 50 employers have been involved in higher education curriculum development and delivery. The College states that it has over 80 work placement providers and more than 70 partnerships in the voluntary and public sectors.

5.3 Employer forums ensure contributions from employers to curriculum design processes and engagement with their feedback. The Employability Hub supports programme teams in their engagement with employers, for example by coordinating employer forums and working to increase the voice of employers in curriculum design. Matters impacting on employability are central to the design process, and a key part of the assessment strategy is to assess knowledge, skills and abilities that are relevant to employers.

5.4 Work-based learning opportunities are managed and delivered by the Commercial and Business Development Team. This team supports curriculum centres in engaging with employers. Recent developments include: the Workhouse, a partnership whose aim is to increase student progression into employment; the Collaborative Leadership programme which is designed with the region's public services in mind; and a Higher Education Academy workshop on Crossing the Employability Chasm.

5.5 The review team met with a large group of employers, who described their work with the College as a true partnership extending beyond the formal curriculum and encompassing all levels through to the senior team. They praised the freedom within the College for course leaders to develop long-term relationships with employers, the regular and easy opportunities for feedback, and the willingness of academic staff to explore and understand employers' needs and to ensure that their views were influential in programme design. Work-based learning was commended for reflecting the challenges and reality of the workplace. The role of the Enterprise Champion has been particularly successful in reaching out to 10 times the number of students initially anticipated, with over 2,000 students involved in the 2014 Global Entrepreneurship Week.

5.6 The universal agreement among students, staff and employers of the strength, depth and range of the College's external partnerships supports the features of good practice identified in Expectation B4 relating to the development of students' employability and in Expectation B10 in respect of the widespread integration of work-based learning through active and extensive collaboration with employer networks.



## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 29 to 32 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx).

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.

See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

### **Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations.

See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FHEQIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

### **Learning outcomes**

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

**Programme specifications**

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

**Public information**

Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

**Quality Code**

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

**Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

**Subject Benchmark Statement**

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

**Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

**Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

**Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

**Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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